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# *A Slight Touch of Hitchcock*

TORN CURTAIN  
directed by Alfred Hitchcock

Early in *Torn Curtain* Paul Newman, playing a false defector to East Germany (he's really a spy for us), is required to bump off a member of the security police who has got on to his little game. The cop is, of course, a professional, equipped with a black leather trench coat, a course in karate and that line of menacingly comic chatter that is one of the conventions of these films—particularly when they are directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Newman, naturally, is an amateur—a scientist unused to exertion with intent to kill and further incapacitated, if that is the word, by having to share his perils with Julie Andrews, who plays his frightened but feisty fiancée and traveling companion. He carries no weapon and for assistance he has only a rather shy-seeming peasant woman (Carolyn Conwell) in whose farmhouse the deadly encounter takes place.

It is, I think, one of the most memorably grotesque fights I have ever seen on film. Newman tries to strangle his opponent and his efforts are all but laughed off. His friend tries to help out with a poker and a knife, and though her trouble is rewarded by a splendid gush of blood, it just gets him madder. Finally, however, they are able to drag the baddie to the oven and finish him off with gas.

Now this is obviously not a scene for the squeamish, but it is a great—even classic—Hitchcock scene, involving his favorite confrontation, that of the game but inept amateur with the highly skilled organization of evil-doers. The blend of terror and comedy in a weird vision of blackness is uniquely his own and is, indeed, what we mean when we speak of "the Hitchcock touch." The response he constantly seeks to elicit is the laugh that turns into a scream—or vice versa—and in this beautifully directed sequence that is precisely what he achieves.

There are in *Torn Curtain* a couple more moments of equal luster—Newman tricking the secret formula out of an egocentric professor (played with nice grumpiness by Ludwig Donath) by engaging him in an intellectual duel which he can win only by spilling the secret; Newman and Miss Andrews on the run for the border but detained by Lila Kedrova as a garrulous, half-mad, whisky-voiced Polish countess who will help them only if they will sponsor her immigration to the U.S. At these times Hitchcock toys with us as we expect him to when we enter the theater—like a Chinese tickle-torturer.

But the truth is that *Torn Curtain*, his 59th feature, more often tends to prove what one has suspected for a long time and been unwilling to admit: that Hitchcock is tired to the point where what once seemed highly personal style is now mere repetition of past triumphs. This is true in small matters—the casting of types, the insistent use of the sound track to create atmosphere and surprise—and in large—the climax of the chase takes place in a crowded theater, just as it did in *The 39 Steps*.

These effects may be tried, but they remain fairly true and one might be tempted to tolerate them as trademarks rather than condemn them as clichés, if the general context of this film were up to Hitchcock standards. But the truth is that Brian Moore's script lacks that constant crackle of smart dialogue that one usually associates with a Hitchcock enterprise, that Newman and Miss Andrews have small ability to play with the high style of such previous Hitchcock leads as Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman, and that there is a distracted air about much of the film—as if the master were not really paying attention to what he was doing. Therefore our emotional involvement never grows to the point where it overrules rational disbelief or blocks out those flaws of logic which should not be noticed until we emerge into daylight.

Of course we do demand more of Hitchcock than we do of less exalted practitioners of suspense. It is also true that on the simplest level *Torn Curtain* is a perfectly acceptable way to while away a couple of idle hours—the location scenes are handsome, the supporting players expert. And there are those three fine scenes. But

on the whole, *Torn Curtain* represents a kind of failure rare for Mr. Hitchcock. Usually when he flops it is because his reach has exceeded his grasp, and one is still respectfully intrigued by the gropings of one of the few genuine artists to function successfully in the commercial cinema. Here, curiously, he fails through lack of ambition and that is saddening, especially since his gift for black humor is now, as never before, completely in tune with the times.